

USCIRF sent the following letter to President Obama Nov. 9, 2009:

The President
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom hopes your upcoming trip to China is both successful and productive. During your visit, we urge you to raise critical issues of religious freedom and the rule of law with Chinese officials, seek meetings with prominent human rights defenders and repressed religious leaders, and make a strong public statement about the importance of human rights to the future of U.S.-China relations. The trip is an opportunity to dispel any notion that human rights and religious freedoms are not priorities, and to set the record straight on any of the Administration's prior statements on the place of human rights in our bilateral relationship with China.

Religion matters in China and it should matter in Sino-American relations as well. Religious adherence is growing in China, as hundreds of millions of Chinese seek to worship and exercise other religious freedom rights, such as expression, freely, without interference or harassment. Increasingly, religious believers are demanding rights guaranteed by China's Constitution and international human rights conventions to which China is a party. Religious organizations are a large segment of China's civil society and Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao, have stated publicly that religious groups can play a beneficial role in the development of Chinese society.

The Chinese government has accommodated some religious practice, but repression of peaceful religious activity remains intense and widespread, focusing on unregistered Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong practitioners and religious groups the government considers "evil cults." In Tibetan and Uighur areas of China, repression of religious freedom has created deep resentments that cannot be mitigated by the inappropriate use of force or other repressive measures. Repression of peaceful Uighur and Tibetan religious practice has fueled, not solved or resolved, ethnic unrest. The importance of defending freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief has also shaped a growing movement of Chinese rights defenders, intellectuals and lawyers who, at great personal and professional expense, seek to advance religious freedom, promote the rule of law, and protect internationally guaranteed rights and freedoms in China.

How the Chinese government deals with its religious minorities and human rights defenders will affect issues of domestic stability and economic development, the transition of China to a rule of law system, and the demands of millions of Chinese for greater freedoms and government transparency—all critical concerns for a growing U.S.-China relationship. For these reasons, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief should remain a priority issue in bilateral discussions.

In July 2009, USCIRF welcomed your eloquent statements before the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue about why religious freedom is an important American interest rooted in our nation's history. Today, and during your travel in China, we urge you to speak out publicly and clearly about why religious freedom is in China's interest, rooted in international human rights treaties and standards which China has affirmed. In your meetings with Chinese leaders we hope you will detail the tangible diplomatic, political, social welfare, security, and economic benefits China can gain by fully protecting and promoting religious freedom and related human rights, and also explain the costs of continued repression and religious freedom abuses to the future growth and flexibility of U.S.-China relations.

The international community should not ignore or remain silent in the face of continued persecution in China in the hopes of finding common ground on other important global concerns. Instead it should recognize that human rights protections and the advancement of the rule of law are critically intertwined with many international interests in China.

We hope that your Administration will listen carefully to China's dissidents, human rights defenders and religious believers, and demonstrate unwavering support for those who are in prison, have disappeared, or who are under pressure in China for seeking greater government accountability, rule of law, religious freedom, and other human rights.

During your brief visit to China, we particularly urge you to:

- meet with embattled human rights defenders (weiquan) to learn about their efforts to strengthen China's judicial and legislative systems and expand the rule of law in China. They have taken on high-profile and politically charged cases and paid a steep price for their advocacy on behalf of China's most vulnerable. As you well know, rule of law touches on every major human rights concern, including torture, treaty compliance, and the rights of Tibetans and other repressed religious groups.

- take up the cases of weiquan who have disappeared, been imprisoned or intimidated, or stripped of their legal licenses for the cases they take and the clients they defend, particularly in your discussions with China's leaders.

In addition to meeting with China's human rights lawyers during your China trip, the Commission also urges you to:

- seek to meet with "unregistered" religious leaders, attend one of their worship services, and encourage Chinese officials to continue taking steps to allow independent registration of Protestant "house churches."

- urge the Chinese government to provide information on the whereabouts of disappeared rights advocates and religious leaders, such as lawyer Gao Zhiseng, Catholic Bishops Su Zhimin and Wu Qinjing, and the Dalai Lama's chosen Panchen Lama Gendun Choekyi Nyima.

- urge the Chinese government to lift all restrictions on peaceful religious practice in Tibetan

and Uighur areas as confidence-building measures in regions because religious and cultural repression are a cause of deep resentment and social tensions in these regions.

- urge the Chinese government to release immediately all those imprisoned for their peaceful religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including Tibetan Buddhists, Protestant “house church” leaders, “underground” Catholic Bishops and priests, Falun Gong practitioners and other individuals accused of being affiliated with “evil cults,” in addition to Uighur Muslims, including the family of Rebiya Kadeer.

- urge the Chinese government, as the Sudanese government’s major oil partner and arms supplier, to use its considerable leverage to end genocide and protect religious freedom in Sudan,

- urge Chinese officials to protect North Korean asylum seekers who face torture and imprisonment upon repatriation.

We know you are personally committed to protecting the vulnerable and expanding the rule of law. During your visit, we hope you will convey those convictions and similar convictions held by all Americans in tangible ways, not only to China's leaders, but also to its people.

Sincerely yours,

Leonard Leo
Chair

cc: Ambassador Jeffrey A. Bader, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director, East Asian Affairs, National Security Council

Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, National Security Council

Scott Busby, Director for Human Rights, Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, National Security Council

Darren Paul Montiero, Associate Director, Office of Public Engagement